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SUBJECT: MELES TELLS CODEL INHOFE HR2003 INSULTING

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles acknowledged Ethiopia's challenges as an emerging democracy to a visiting CODEL led by Senator James Inhofe, but clearly stressed that H.R. 2003 - The Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act - was an insult and risks jeopardizing the excellent U.S.-Ethiopia relationship if enacted into law. Meles noted Ethiopia's strong commitment to counter-terrorism, but emphasized that Ethiopia does not expect a special treatment because of its strong CT cooperation. He did request, however, that the U.S. express its legitimate constructive criticism of Ethiopian actions in a fair and respectful manner and refrain from legislating about the "minutia of internal politics in Ethiopia." Meles appreciated the robust military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation with the United States, but stressed that Ethiopia would not stand down in its own fight against terrorism even if legislation resulted in a significantly diminished relationship. Senator Inhofe and members of his delegation thanked the Prime Minister for his candor and for the strong U.S.-Ethiopian cooperation. Senator Inhofe said that H.R. 2003 does not reflect the position of the United States. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Prime Minister Meles hosted Senator Inhofe's delegation including Congressmen Ander Crenshaw, Robert Aderholt, Dan Boren, Tim Walberg, and Mike McIntyre on November 29. The delegation was joined by Congressional staff members, Ambassador Yamamoto, and PolCouns (note taker). Tesfaye Yilma and Fesseha Tesfu, MFA Director General for the Americas and Europe and Deputy Chief Advisor to the Foreign Ministry respectively accompanied the Prime Minister.

ETHIOPIA'S COMMITMENT TO FIGHTING TERRORISM

¶3. (SBU) Prime Minister Meles opened the meeting by noting the Horn of Africa's position as the "epicenter" of the terrorist threat in the region. Meles argued that terrorists want to establish a caliphate here despite what he proclaimed to be Abyssinia's unique status as the only country in the world that may not be the target of jihad due to the Prophet Mohammed's instruction to followers to protect it. Its geographic position has forced Ethiopia to remain entrenched in the fight against terrorism since the 1990s to protect its own national interests, Meles stated. The Prime Minister emphasized that it was the fight against terrorism that forced Ethiopia to take military action in Somalia against the Council of Islamic Courts and affiliated militias last year and he noted that it was a unilateral decision based on Ethiopia's interests. Meles emphasized that Ethiopia did not request financial support from the U.S. for that endeavor, but noted that Ethiopia derived adequate satisfaction from the strong U.S.-Ethiopia cooperation since then as it was evident to Ethiopia that the U.S. "was in the same trench" as

Ethiopia. Ethiopia is fighting terrorism in its own interests, he stated, "we will do it with or without the U.S., but we prefer to do it with you."

ETHIOPIA'S SURVIVAL DEPENDS ON DEMOCRATIZATION...

¶4. (SBU) Moving beyond the war against terror, the Prime Minister argued that Ethiopia's survival depends on democratization as it is too divisive for anything else. While stressing that the government is serious about democratization, Meles was quick to note that it is Ethiopia's process. After recounting the government's version of events following the 2005 elections, Meles conceded that the Ethiopian Government (GoE) had made mistakes and could have done better with better training and equipment. He then shifted to the positive democratic openings that have occurred since late 2006 -- revised parliamentary rules to accommodate a multi-party legislature, a reform agenda for the National Electoral Board, and the pardon of 71 opposition leaders convicted for post-election disturbances.

...BUT DON'T LEGISLATE HOW WE DO IT

¶5. (SBU) Meles quickly moved to H.R. 2003, the "fly in the ointment" of an otherwise strong bilateral relationship. The Prime Minister objected to the House-passed bill, arguing that it is unfair and unduly singles out Ethiopia. Highlighting the lack of human rights or democratic institutions or processes in the "open air prison" of Eritrea, Meles argued that H.R. 2003 effectively represented the United States "kicking its friend" when others have far more egregious records. Meles particularly highlighted a provision in the bill limiting security assistance until the President certifies

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that Ethiopia's National Electoral Board (NEB) includes representatives from all parties in parliament. Meles argued that such a provision not only does not reflect a U.S. best practice -- where no national elections board exist and ruling parties at the state level administer elections -- but contradicts an agreement between the ruling and opposition parties from the inter-party dialogue that NEB members would be politically neutral. Despite the fact that that provision was already in an earlier version of the bill before the inter-party dialogue began, Meles argued that the bill's sponsor included the provision to accommodate disgruntled rejectionists in the opposition who were unwilling to accept the NEB's independence.

¶6. (SBU) Meles concluded by noting that he felt personally insulted by the House of Representative's passage of H.R. 2003 as it reflected a friendly country telling Ethiopia how to operate and suggested that the ultimate enactment of the bill, if passed by the Senate, would jeopardize the excellent U.S.-Ethiopia cooperative relationship. As friends, Meles advised, the United States should be fair and respectful if it is going to criticize Ethiopia, but "don't legislate about the minutia of internal politics in Ethiopia."

H.R. 2003 IS NOT THE POSITION OF THE UNITED STATES

¶7. (SBU) Senator Inhofe was quick to clarify to the Prime Minister that H.R. 2003 had not yet "passed the Congress" as Meles repeatedly lamented, and noted his own speech on the Senate floor opposing the bill -- comments which the GoE have acclaimed and reproduced throughout state media sources. Congressmen Aderholt, Boren, and Walberg explained U.S. parliamentary procedure and how the combination of being introduced under suspended rules and subjected to a voice vote helped expedite H.R. 2003 through the House without the degree of scrutiny that it may have deserved. Congressman Walberg remarked that the Prime Minister's discussion "helps remind us of the consequences of our decisions" and Congressman Crenshaw highlighted the utility of a bicameral legislature which provides an additional safeguard to ensure a thorough vetting of potential legislation. Senator Inhofe and the entire delegation said that H.R. 2003 has not passed the Congress and does not reflect the

position of the United States. Senator Inhofe strongly opposes the bill. All members of the delegation expressed their sincere appreciation to the Prime Minister and the Ethiopian Government for the robust bilateral relationship and cooperation that the U.S. and Ethiopia share.

¶8. (U) Senator Inhofe has cleared this cable.

YAMAMOTO